THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE THEOLOGICAL VISION OF BEDE GRIFFITHS

Bede Griffiths, known as Swami Dayananda, was the *guru* and *acarya* of Shantivanam Ashram in Tamilnadu. Needless to say, he was drawing world-wide attention as a spiritual guide and so he was aptly portrayed by Raimundo Panikkar as, "one of today's leading spiritual fathers in a world where there are too few."[1] Despite the fact that he basically shared the theological trends of his distinguished predecessors - Monchanin and Abhishiktananda, he had broadened his vision, in course of time, through wider contact with people belonging to various religious traditions. Evolving a new Christology in the multi-religious context of India was one of his central concerns. Obvious as it is, the issue of uniqueness of Jesus Christ has emerged today so important and crucial in the face of religious pluralism that it has been widely discussed at various quarters in spite of being overwhelmingly complex and profoundly delicate. Griffiths made an attempt to probe into this current issue in his endeavour to arrive at an Indian Christology.

JESUS CHRIST: THE FULFILLMENT OF ALL RELIGIONS

Even a cursory look at the writings of Griffiths published in his early stage makes it evident that he was convinced of the uniqueness of Christ on the ground that He is the only fulfiller of the deep-seated aspirations and longings of Eastern religious traditions and particularly of Hinduism. The fulfillment theory was so prevalent and dominant in the Indian theological thinking until the 1960s that Griffiths was much enamoured of it like any other missionary or theologian of that time. It also coincided with his deep conviction of Christ, evolved from the discovery of God, in the first place, and then of Christ during the spiritual struggle he was undergoing as a young man in his native country,

1. Raimundo Panikkar, quoted on the back cover of Bede Griffiths' book, *River and Compassion* (New York : Amithy House, 1987).

England.[2] He was, therefore, attempting to explain the significance of the uniqueness chiefly from the point of view of fulfillment.

As years passed by, Griffiths adopted a new vision of complementarity in his incessant effort to shed light on the place and the role of Christ in the face of other religions and thereby to study the question of uniqueness. Accordingly, each religious tradition manifests the one Divine Mystery under diverse symbols. Each revelation under different symbols is complementary in the sense that each would contribute towards a fuller understanding of one Reality from a new dimension. It is in their common endeavour and commitment to this contribution that all religions discover their complementarity. In this view, religions are recognized as having their own specific character and all can come together on an equal footing to share what is decisive and distinct in them[3].

It is to be acknowledged that the emerging consciousness of religious pluralism and the increasing felt need of promoting inter-religious dialogue so as to achieve religious harmony led Griffiths to adopt the view of complementarity. But while recognizing the complementarity of diverse religious traditions, the age old Christian affirmation of Jesus Christ as the unique and universal saviour comes into question. To be precise, the problem Griffiths encountered was how to maintain together the theory of complementarity and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In this context, he spells out his view as follows :

> All the religions are complementary, each has its own specific character. I would say honestly that to me there is a fullness

2. The whole book *The Golden String* deals with the personal narration of his search for God, which led him to acknowledgement of Christ and of the Church: cfr. Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (revised edition) (Illinois : Templegate, 1980).

3. Bede Griffiths, "Emerging Consciousness for a New Humankind," *National Christian Council Review*, 105 (1985), p. 296.

and finality in Christ which I do not find in others. But I would not press that on the Hindus obviously. I would rather simply emphasize the unique character of the Christian revelation and of Christ[4].

To elaborate further, the supreme mystery of God has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ at a particular historical moment. What must be brought out is what is unique in the mystery of Christ, namely, the Trinity, the incarnation, redemption and also certain concepts which are quite distinct in Christianity. In other words, the mystery of Christ, which is the mystery of God's self communication, is to be made known in some way to all people due to the fact that it is the faith claim of Christians.[5] God's revelation has come in the end through Jesus Christ. Therefore, there is no one who is outside the Christian revelation, in the sense that Christ died for all human beings from the beginning till the end of the time, in order to bring them to the state of communion with God. However, the Christian affirmation that the revelation of God through Christ is unique does not mean that the revelations in other religious traditions are false or inferior[6].Other religions can be also mediators of divine grace, if not in the same manner like Christianity. In them, too, Christ is present. The mystery of Jesus Christ completes and carries them to their perfection.[7]

It is to be noted that Griffiths perceives here how delicate and intricate it is to assert the uniqueness of Jesus Christ while upholding, at the same time, the view of complementarity in the multi-religious context. The idea of uniqueness held by him is not exclusive but inclusive. In what follows let us delve deep into the concepts such as myth and cosmic revelation which would enable us to bring out candidly the various dimensions of the uniqueness of Christ as envisaged by

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4. Jesu Rajan, *Bede Griffiths and Sannyasa* (Bangalore : Asian Trading Corporation, 1989), p. 247.

5. Bede Griffiths, "Two Theologies," *The Tablet*, 234 (1980), p.520.

6. Bede Griffiths, "Unity and Diversity," *The Tablet*, 224 (1975), P. 702.

7. Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* (London : Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1982), pp. 30-31.

him. In the treatment of both, it will become clear how different religions converge and complement and at the same time how Christ remains unique in the process of convergence and complementarity.

THE CONCEPT OF MYTH IN THE THOUGHT OF BEDE GRIFFITHS

In recent decades, much has been discussed and written about demythologization in the Western theological tradition. But there emerges today a more positive and comprehensive approach to myths putting aside the pejorative sense as connoting untruth or illusion. The understanding of Griffiths on myth, of course, does not in any way relate to the Western discussion, but originates from his own personal involvement and experience with the world of Hinduism which is replete with myths of every kind.

According to Griffiths, the mythical has the mystical as its origin and source[8]. All religions, as a matter of fact, began with some kind of a mystical experience from which they derive their force and strength, power and vitality. It is an experience in depth which could hardly be communicated in words and concepts due to the fact that any encounter with Ultimate Reality transcends the capacity of the mind to know in the ordinary sense. It is given expression, therefore, in symbols, rituals, language and social organization of people living in a particular social and cultural milieu. In a nutshell, the symbolic expression of the Ultimate Reality in terms of human imagination is called myth[9]. It serves the function of providing a forum in which the innermost experiences are communicated. Furthermore, myth is not only supposed to represent the original experience, but also to be a vehicle to lead some one to the realm of that experience of the Divine Mystery. It also renders the service of preserving the unity of the three realms of human, divine and cosmic, as it can move easily from one realm to another. As Griffiths explains,

> Myth in its origin is the symbolic expression of the one Reality experience as a living unity in an undivided consciousness.

8. Ibid., pp. 174-175.

9. Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* (London : Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1983), p. 115.

Vedic man, for instance, in whom the mythical consciousness is most richly developed, experienced the world and himself in what Dr. Panikkar in an awkward but significant term has called a <cosmotheandric> unity. In other words, God, man, and the world are originally experienced in a total unity.[10]

All religions encompass the mythical and in particular Hinduism lives most in the world of myth. Hindu myth grew out of the mystical experience of the Vedic seers and the saints and sages of India. For instance, "*Brahman, Atman and Purusa* are words which have been so refined in the face of mystical experience, that they indicate with extraordinary power and precision the nature of that Ultimate Reality to which they bear witness."[11] At the heart of the mythology of Hinduism there is a philosophical tradition and spiritual wisdom. Because of its deep spiritual foundation Hindu mythology still survives, while Greek gods have long ago faded away into poetic fiction. The personal gods of Hinduism are also mythological figures, symbols of the Divine Mystery. While Visnu and Siva belong to cosmic myth, Rama and Krishna are mythological figures which seem to embody the ideal of humanity and reveal God to man. Even Ganesh, the elephant-faced-god, signifies the union of God and man, as well as man and the animal kingdom. Hanuman, the monkey-faced-god, is seen as the perfect devotee, the symbol of *bhakti* and of devoted love. As Griffiths says, "in Hinduism the myth is given metaphysical meaning and this in turn leads to the ultimate mystical reality."[12]

On the other hand, it is generally accepted that Christianity is an historically revealed religion. God entered into the process of history and revealed Himself to humanity so as to offer a new life of communion. But Griffiths asserts that the <historical> in the Christian faith should also be intimately linked to the <mythical>. If the historical furnishes facts and events, it is the mythical which makes them speak and endows them with meaning and direction. To put it in his words: "Always myth

10. Ibid., p. 15.

11. Ibid., p. 104.

12. Bede Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West*, op. cit., p. 102.

and history go together, the historic event is interpreted in the light of its symbolic meaning."[13] This is clearly found in the religious and historical experience of people of the Old Testament. In a significant passage in his book *Return to the Centre,* he states :

> It is precisely the mythical element that reveals the universal significance of the events. Of themselves the events recorded in the Old and the New Testaments would have a very limited importance; it is the myth that relates them to the eternal drama of man's salva tion. Paradise and Fall, the Exodus and the Promised Land, the Messiah and the Kingdom, Jerusalem the city of God, the New heaven and the new earth - these are the great myths which transform the history of a small people in the Middle East into a symbol of the destiny of man.[14]

In continuation with our explanation, it can be said that myth and history converge and combine in the Divine-human interaction. History by itself, as a mere succession of events, has no meaning. When historical events are seen to reveal the ultimate significance of life, then myth and history meet and combine. The mythical gives the historical content and direction, while the historical gives the mythical a vehicle of concretization. Without history, myth remains powerful but unconnected, and yet history without myth becomes blind and devoid of a specific direction.

For instance, the New Testament is primarily the record of God's revelation in the process of history. At the same time, the interest of the New Testament writers is, "not primarily in the precise historical events, but in their universal meaning, that is, in their symbolism."[15] Therefore, the myth becomes crystallized in the person of Christ. The myth of Christ is gradually springing from the experience of the disciples

13. Bede Griffiths, "A Symbolic Theology," *New Blackfriars*, 69 (1988), p. 291.

14 Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* (London : Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1978), p. 79.

15. Bede Griffiths, *"Symbolic Theology,"* op. cit., p. 292.

of Christ at Pentecost. In the light of the Spirit, through their transformed consciousness, they have realized who and what this Jesus is whom they have known. The disciples have had a mystical experience of Jesus Christ, which has shaped their minds and their attitudes to life. They have expressed it in the symbolic languages of the Old Testament. Christ is seen, accordingly, as the person in whom the ultimate meaning of human life and history is revealed. It is expressed, "in the symbolic language of the Hebrew tradition, of the coming of the <Kingdom of God>, of the <Son of Man>, who is also <Son of God>, of his birth from a virgin, of his death and resurrection and ascension."[16] It is the language of mythology, which is not to say that they are untrue, but to point out that they are actual historical events manifesting the universal significance and reality behind life. They are symbols of new birth by which humanity participates in divine life, of deliverance from sin and death and achievement of immortality. In the explanation of Griffiths :

> The birth of Jesus from a virgin was the sign of the birth of a new humanity, born "not of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1:13). His miracles were the sign of the "new creation" (Jn 17:23), the transformation of matter by the Spirit, that is through its penetration by consciousness. His death and resurrection were the sign of the passage through death to new life in the spirit, which man has to undergo in order to realize God. His <descent into hell> and his <ascension into heaven> are the signs of the penetration of the Spirit into the depths of the unconscious and passage to the Super-conscious state..... his Second Coming is the final manifestion of the T ruth or Reality itself.[17]

Now it becomes clear that these are historical events whose meaning is spiritual or mythical which is the deepest level of truth, that is of intuitive wisdom and mystical consciousness. If they remained merely historical events, they would not have any remarkable impact on humanity. On the other hand, they are, "the combination of myth and

16. Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* op. cit., p. 32.

17. Ibid., p. 34.

history, of meaning and event, that makes them a revelation of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life."[18]

At this stage, the question being asked is this: what is distinctive in the Christian religion? Griffiths would answer that it is certainly its historical character. Historical revelation of God through His only Son Jesus Christ at the fullness of time is an important element which specifically distinguishes Christianity from Hinduism. It is the same element which can complement Hinduism. On the same point of historical character he is venturing to see the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

THE CONCEPT OF COSMIC REVELATION IN THE THOUGHT OF BEDE GRIFFITHS

While the myth of diverse religious traditions assists us to peep into the Divine Mystery which brings all religions together, cosmic revelation is perceived by Griffiths as another point of convergence and bond of union among religions. It is an important element in his integral theological vision. Cosmic revelation is the vision of the Divine Reality manfesting itself in nature, being and life, and in the depths of interiority. In other words, it is an experience of the primordial presence of the Divine Mystery in the world and within one's inner self. The Mystery lies behind all religions from the most primitive to the most advanced. Even in ancient tribal cultures, we can uncover the presence of the Divine Mystery. As Griffiths points out, the primitive tribes such as American Indians speak of the characteristic of Sacred Mystery as *Taku Wakan*, which is, "the supernatural and mysterious."[19] In his view, it comprehends all mystery, secret power and divinity. What is true of the American Indians and what seems to be the basic pattern of all primitive religions, is also true of Hinduism.

Hinduism is a cosmic religion. It is based on the experience of God in creation and the experience of God in the heart. The cosmic revelation in its external aspect is expressed in Vedic tradition, and in

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18. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* op. cit. p. 79.

19. Ibid., p. 21.

its interior aspect is expressed in the Upanishads where one tries to discover the inner self. In the Vedic revelation the entire universe is permeated by the Divine mystery. Everything is sacred and everything is sacramental so much so the whole cosmos becomes the vehicle of the Divine Mystery. God is immanent, immanent in every created being - in the earth, in the water, in the fire, in the air, in the plants, in the animals, in peoples - everywhere God is present.[20] Everything in the universe is understood to have three dimensions, namely physical, psychological and spiritual, which are always seen as interdependent. To explain this point,

Griffiths puts forward an example of *Agni* :

> In the thinking of the ancients the three worlds of the Vedas were always seen to be interwoven. A good example of this..... is the god of Agni, the god of fire. In the Vedas it is quite clear that Agni at one level is the physical fire, the fire which was lit at the sacrifice. This fire also has a wider physical aspect, for it is the energy which works through the universe and manifests as fire. But at the same time it has a psychological aspect, being the fire of life and the fire of mind..... As the fire of mind, it is the energy which rises up within us and manifests itself in thought. Thirdly there is also a spiritual aspect. Both the physical and the psychological are understood as manifestations of the one Supreme Spirit which is manifesting at all levels of the universe.[21]

He gives another illustration of *devas* which according to him is a good example to illustrate Hinduism as a cosmic religion. The Supreme Reality which is known as *Brahman* manifests himself in the *devas,* the gods, the powers which rule creation. They are cosmic powers manifesting themselves in the whole of creation. Furthermore, the Hindu temples, *pujas,* rituals etc. are different expressions of the cosmic revelation.

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20. Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* op cit., p. 23.

21. Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality* (London : Collins, 1989), p. 59.

In Hinduism, there is another essential aspect of the cosmic revelation. It is the revelation of the Eternal One, who is present in the cosmic order, in the depths of the heart of the person. The God who is immanent in the entire universe and all of nature, being and life, also dwells at the centre of one's own being. When man enters into the depths of his very being, he can discover the Divine Mystery indwelling in him. The cosmic revelation in its double aspect of exterior as well as interior, is a continuous and never ending movement like the dance of Siva :

> He (Siva) is presented with four arms dancing in a circle of fire, dancing at the heart of creation. It is a cosmic dance: it represents the power which permeates the whole universe. The idea is that God is dancing in the heart of creation and in every human heart. We must find the Lord who is dancing in our hearts ; then we will see the Lord dancing in all of creation.[22]

Griffiths is of the opinion that there is a sense of the cosmic revelation, the primordial experience of the Divine Mystery in the Biblical tradition. To this primordial manifestation of the Divine belong the figures of Adam, Noah, Melchizedek. The covenantal relationship between God and man bears witness to the existence of a cosmic revelation. The cosmic covenant began with Adam and was renewed with Noah. Griffiths sees in the covenant with Adam a relationship with the entire humanity, and sees the covenant itself as a strong indication of the existence of a primordial revelation which he elucidates as follows :

> This covenant with Adam is the covenant with Man. The Bible is concerned with God's relation with Man from the beginning. However far we have to extend the creation of man, may be to millions of years, it is still covered by this Cosmic Covenant where God has related Himself to mankind. The word *adam* in Hebrew simply means <man>. God has been calling man from the beginning of time, and that is the cosmic covenant.[23]

So also, the same can be said of Noah. He is the father of mankind

22. Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* op. cit., p. 41.

23. Ibid., p. 27.

and so God's covenant with him is the symbol of the divine covenant made with all nations. Yahweh told Noah and his sons: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you" (Gen 9:9). The rainbow will serve as, "sign of the covenant which I (God) make between me and you.... for all future generations" (Gen 9:12; also cfr. Gen 9:16). This covenant with him is an expression of the cosmic covenant, as it deals with the universal, though personal in nature, intervention on the part of God to people of all nations.

Furthermore, in the Book of Wisdom there is a beautiful reference to the revelation of God's presence in the created order (Wis 13: 1-9). As St. Paul expresses it in his letter to the Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (1:20). God reveals Himself not only in nature, but also in the heart of every man. St. Paul asserts this fact while dealing with the question of the Gentiles who, though they do not have the law of Moses, have the law written in their hearts (Rom 2: 14-15). It becomes clear from the explanation of Griffiths that there is a concept of the cosmic covenant made with all human beings.

It can be said that the cosmic revelation is a concept through which Griffiths makes an attempt to relate the various world religions. This becomes true of how he relates the Hindu and Hebrew traditions. Against the background of the cosmic revelation, he is attempting to analyze the revelation of God through Jesus Christ which took place at a particular moment of history. In the encounter between the cosmic revelation and the historical revelation of God through Christ, he is perceiving the aspect of complementarity, in the sense that the historical can complement the cosmic. In this effort, he is discerning the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS CHRIST

First of all, as envisaged by Griffiths, there are myths built around Jesus Christ. The events such as the virgin birth, transfiguration, death, resurrection, ascension etc. are symbols revealing in depth the unknown mystery of God to humanity. In that sense, they contain some mythical character. He affirms that the fact is to be acknowledged. He emphasizes, at the same time, in his writings another important and significant fact that Jesus Christ is a historical figure. He is a real person functioning in history unlike the mythological *avatars* of Hinduism. History is one of the elements that distingushes the Christian tradition from that of Hinduism.

1. Hinduism is grounded in mythology and the contemplative doctrines that evolved from the mystical experience of the Vedic seers from time immemorial. It is rich in the mythology of the Vedas, the Epics and the *'Puranas'* which form part of its sacred texts. Mythology has been sustaining it right up to the present day. To say that Hinduism is rooted in mythology is not to depreciate or underestimate it in any way. However, as Griffiths points out, no one can overlook the obvious danger involved in mythology. Since mythology arises from archetypal images of the unconscious, it lives in the world of imagination, and so it is always in danger of being led to fantasy. He explains as follows :

> There is always the element of fantasy, and always an element of ambivalence. The myth is always fluid and its hold on reality is uncertain. I have always found it baffling when talking even to educated Hindus to see how easily their minds move from what we would call a sphere of history and philosophy to a sphere of myth and fantasy. They will speak of some person of today - Ramakrishna, or Mahatma Gandhi - and the next moment they will speak of Krishna and his sporting with the Gopis, as though they were on exactly the same level. They seem to move from the historic and the philosophical to the imaginative plane without any demarcation.[24]

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24. Ibid., pp. 115-116.

Due to the impending danger of fantasy, myths tend to escape from reality instead of confronting it in the actual life situation. In this connection, another factor which Griffiths brings to light is that as a result of the deep mythological character in Hinduism, there is a growing danger today that some well educated Hindus are prone to lose their conviction in religious practices and become practically agnostic.[25] The root cause, as indicated by him, is evidently its lack of sufficient historical basis.

By contrast, Christianity is based on the historical revelation. It is based on the actual historical event of Jesus christ's life in this world of space and time, in a definite period of history. Griffiths expresses the importance of the historical element in Christianity in this way :

> It is of the essence of Christian faith that Jesus of Nazareth was 'crucified under Pontius Pilate'. This is enshrined in the earliest Christian creed and is a fact of history known to the Roman historian Tacitus. This setting in concrete historical time is of the essence of the Christian revelation. [26]

At the same time, there are myths around Christ which convey the deeper meaning of the Ultimate Reality as explained beforehand. According to Griffiths, myth and history converge and combine in the process of Divine-human interaction which reached its perfection in Jesus Christ. It marks his uniqueness.

In Jesus myth and history meet. Myth reveals the ultimate meaning and significance of life, but it has no hold on history and loses itself in the world of imagination. History itself, as a mere succession of events, has no meaning..... When historical events are seen to reveal the ultimate significance of life, then myth and history meet [27].

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25. Ibid., p. 116.

26. Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* op. cit., p.177.

27. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* op. cit., p. 78.

If the revelation through Jesus Christ were to be purely a myth, it would not have been a unique event that transformed the world. If it were merely an event without symbolizing the Divine Mystery, it would have been received by people, but with a very limited interest. On the contrary, it is, "the combination of myth and history, of meaning and event, that makes a revelation of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life."[28] In Jesus Christ, "myth is present in a historic person, historic place, historic time."[29] This makes him unique, according to Griffiths.

2. Taking up the historicity and also moral perfection of Jesus Christ as important factors for consideration, Griffiths proceeds further in the explanation of his understanding of uniqueness. Historicity is indeed a crucial point for him, one which he does not tire of making whenever he compares the Christian and Hindu traditions.

In the first place, it is to be recognized that there are number of *avataras* in Hinduism. The *avatara* belongs to the world of mythology and has no sufficient historical basis. Griffiths particularly brings the example of Krishna who is a legendary hero of an epic poem Mahabharata to the discussion of historicity and writes:"..... Krishna is a mythical character..... There may have been an historical Krishna..... but he has become a legendary character, the hero of an epic poem, the Mahabharata, and of the *Puranas,* which belong to the world of myth."[30] Likewise, Rama is also a semi-historical figure of legends. By contrast, Jesus christ is not a mythological figure, but a unique historical person, who can be located in time and whose life, actions and teachings are recorded. He reveals the infinite God in historic time and place and in his historic death and resurrection. The historicity is his unique characteristic.

Secondly, with regard to moral character, it can be said for Krishna that there are plenty of stories about him which are filled with indecent and obscene incidents. He is known for the quality of ecstatic love, and for somewhat questionable behaviour towards the Gopis, which

28 Ibid., p. 79.

29 Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* op. cit., p. 126.

30 Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* op. cit., p. 82.

seems to project him as an unethical and unrighteous person. They can be given, it is true, an allegorical interpretation. Yet, Griffiths brings to our notice an interesting factor which lays hold of reality:

> These are beautiful allegorical stories but you can see that the ordinary person can interpret them in many other ways, and they have been interpreted in ways that have led to extreme eroticism in the worship of Krishna.[31]

In comparison, Rama has a moral character, but he is also found to have some serious defects.[32] Griffiths feels that on the whole it is difficult to find anywhere in Hinduism a comparable conception of the holiness of God which is essentially a moral holiness. But, contrary to the above religious figures, in the actual historical person of Jesus Christ there is no single sign of moral ambiguity, particularly as in the case of Krishna. Christ represents the moral perfection of holiness, the primary chracteristic of God himself. Griffiths argues that the unique relationship which he enjoyed with the Father, as the Son of God, is a clear mark of his moral perfection. He experienced God in utter closeness to himself and addressed Him as *Abba* which is a term of extreme intimacy. His sonship was not temporal, but eternal. In the words of Griffiths :

> The Father gives Himself in love to the Son, who is the very form, the expression, of His love, and this love returns to the Father in the Holy Spirit, who unites Father and Son in the eternal embrace of love.[33]

In and through Christ the new life of communion with God is open to all. In short :

> What was unique in Christ was that he called himself the Son of God, that is, he recongnized a unique.relationship between himself and the God he called his Father.[34]

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31 Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* op. cit., p. 117.

32 Bede Griffiths, "Man and God in India," *The Tablet*, 225 (1971), p.6.

33 Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* op. cit., p. 61.

34 Ibid

Added to this is another moral quality of Christ to which Griffiths draws our attention, the unfathomable love of God for humanity revealed in him. It was revealed in him, "not in poetry but in history. It was shown not in ecstasy but in self-giving for others, in the surrender of his life on the cross."[35] Griffiths believes that the crucial question in this context is : Can Hinduism accept a God who suffers and dies, who enters history, whose love is experienced in suffering and dereliction? Jesus experienced the suffering of the body, he experienced the suffering of the soul, felt abandoned by God when he cried : "My God, My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34). It revealed the depth of the mystery of Jesus Christ. Though he was in the form of God, yet he emptied himself and experienced the sense of separation from God for the sake of humanity (Phil 2:6-7). The crucifixion was not a play or *"lila"* of God. It was indeed a suffering of redemption and reconciliation. In short, Christ is pure holiness, holiness of God, the essence of which is love of God and of humanity, totally one with God and one with humanity.[36] Griffiths asserts that this quality of moral perfection ascribed to God is all the more found in the Judeo Christian tradition, and that it reaches its fullness in Christ. It is his conviction that moral perfection makes Jesus Christ really unique.

3. In the cosmic revelation of Hinduism, time is of cyclic character and there is no sufficient awareness of historical reality. Accordingly, human life is also conceived in cyclic terms of *'samsara,'* the wheel of time, in which man passes through successive births. The world then becomes unreal and is regarded simply as a place of continual recurrence. History becomes a passing phenomenon without any ultimate significance. In the end, it will lead people to acquire a deep sense of fatalism. As a consequence, there seems to be no room for encouragement to get people actively involved in the development of society. Griffiths describes the down to earth reality of India as follows:

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35 Ibid., p. 83.

36 Bede Griffiths, "Christianity in the Light of the East," *Monastic Bulletin*, 49 (1991), p. 55.

> I cannot help feeling that the present situation of India, with its masses of poor, illiterate people, of people suffering from disease and being left to die in the streets, really stems from this basic philosophy - all are caught in this wheel of '*samsara*.' Your '*karma*' has brought you to this state where you are dying in the street..... If you can help somebody else..... that is good, but there is no obligation to do it. 'Karma' is working itself out[37].

Moreover, '*avatara*' is seen as recurring again and again on earth in some form or other each time righteousness declines. It is precisely at this point that he visualizes the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

In the view of Griffiths, the Judeo-Christian revelation overcomes the exclusively mythical conception of time and its implications for man's moral and social life. Time is conceived in this revelation not as cyclic, but as linear, that is, it has a beginning and is constantly moving towards an end. God is acting in and through history and is leading the whole of mankind towards an end, an *'eschaton'*, a final stage. According to him, this progressive conception of time breaks through the whole idea of *'samsara'*, the wheel of time. All things are brought under the providence of God and are leading to a final fulfillment. Time is moving towards a definite spiritual goal.

Jesus Christ, in the vision of Griffiths, came within the context of this historical time, this movement towards the end. He entered as one who eventually brings it to its fulfillment. [38] Unlike the mythological figures of Hinduism, he is a person really functioning in history. God's revelation has gradually reached its fullness through him. As Paul says,".....according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9-10). His entrance into history is meant to influence the historical life of mankind, to transform the human race for ever. The transformation of all humanity and the cosmos begins in the incarnation, in the redemptive act of Christ's death and resurrection.

37 Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* op. cit., p. 118.

38 Bede Griffiths, "Mystical Theology in the Indian Tradition," *Jeevadhara*, 53 (1979), p. 274.

The salvific presence of God in history through him gives man a strong indication of purpose and direction in the historical process and in life itself. In doing so, history becomes meaningful and purposeful. As Griffiths says :

> ... the life and death and resurrection of Christ have not only a meaning for all, but also an effect on history. Through the death and resurrection of Christ the history of man has been changed. Mankind has been changed because mankind is ultimately one, an organic, interdependent whole extending through space and time. The death and resurrection extends to all humanity.[39]

> It is God's Revelation, not in mythical time..... but in historic time among a historic people..... in which all things are to be fulfilled. This death and resurrection of Christ is a unique event.... It is a sign of God's salvation for the whole creation and the whole of humanity. But it is a sign which is rooted in history.[40]

> All things are under the providence of God and are leading to a final fulfillment. With the coming of Christ we encounter this finality.[41]

In the Christian vision, Christ is the finality. He is the purpose of history, or the way to realize the goal of time and the historical process. It is worth mentioning, as indicated by Griffiths, that in the case of *'avataras'* there is no clear sense of finality, as, " *'avatar'* comes and restores the world and then goes back and another one comes and another, always in succession of *'avataras'*. "[42] On the other hand, there is a distinct finality in the revelation of God through Christ. He came once and for all at the fullness of time to bring all things to a

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39 Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* op. cit., p. 128.

40 Ibid., p. 125.

41 Ibid p. 123.

42 "Mission in Dialogue : An Interview with Fr. Bede Griffiths," *Jeevadhara*, 3 (1981),p. 49.

fulfillment and so, "he is said to be not an 'avatar' who can come again and again."[43] It becomes clear that Griffiths regards the historicity of Jesus Christ as a unique characteristic which distinguishes him from all *'avataras'* and that which makes human life meaningful and purposeful. As he writes emphatically :

> From all the evidence, Krishna is God becoming man, but not God becoming man in a unique, historical way, as a unique person bringing fulfillment to human history.[44]

> As long as he is regarded as a mere symbolic figure like Rama and Krishna, Christ can never have a true birth in the Indian soul. But when it comes to be realized that he is in reality a historical figure, that he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, that he is the point at which God enters history.... as a person, to change the course of history and to transform it, then the decisive point in the history of India may also be reached.[45]

4. As a last point in the present study of uniqueness, we can mention the death and resurrection of Christ which remains not merely at the realm of history, but emerges as a cosmic event. It is, first of all, the sign of God's salvation for the whole of humanity. Even the whole of creation finds an ultimate meaning and an ultimate purpose in the death and resurrection of Christ. According to him, any historic event cannot be separated from its place in the cosmos. Human history is a part of cosmic history. Every event in history and time affects in some measure the whole of creation, since all the elements of the world are interdependent. At the same time, there are certain events like the emergence of life on this planet, the awakening of consciousness in man which are particularly critical stages in the evolution of this universe. For Griffiths the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is an event of this kind.

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43 Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality* op. cit., p. 166.

44 Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion* op.cit., p.69.

45 Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India : Essays Towards Hindu-Christian Dialogue.* (NewYork : Charles Scribner's Sons. 1966), p.110-111.

Let us explain it a little further. Sin, as seen by him, is the root cause of any disharmony in the human community, and also in the universe at large. Sin is viewed as separating oneself from the order of the universe, making oneself an isolated person. Man is separated form nature, from his fellowmen and above all from his very Ground in the Self, namely God. In short, it is a refusal to go back to God, the source of everything. But to separate oneself in isolation is to go against the law of the universe which maintains harmony.[46] Griffiths says that modern man has experienced this isolation, this alienation in a very acute sense, more than any other time in human history. The ultimate cause of this isolation of man can be none other than deep-rooted ego-consciousness with which he has got entangled.[47]

At this juncture, he asserts that through death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has overcome this prevailing conflict as a consequence of sin, and has re-establised harmony in the universe. Redemption in him has restored mankind to unity. In him every man is able to return to God, participating in his divine reality. When Christ was hanging on the cross, he accepted and experienced the pain of the whole world due to disharmony. By surrendering his life on the cross, being totally obedient to the will of the Father, he achieved the final death of the self to this world and raised it to eternal life in resurrection. He accomplished the total surrender of man to God, of the human to the divine. [48] In this sense, "the death of Christ can be called a redemptive sacrifice; it is an offering of the human nature to the divine which redeems, that is restores human nature to its unity with the divine nature. "[49] By doing so, Christ re-established total harmony in the universe. As he explains :

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46 Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality* op. cit., p.61.

47 Bede Griffiths, "Death and Resurrection." *The Tablet* 235 (1981), p.386.

48 Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* op. cit., p.89.

49 Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* op. cit., p.118.

> Whereas in the universe, as we know it, there is conflict at every level, and body and soul are in conflict with one another, in Jesus this conflict has been overcome, body and soul have been restored to unity with the Spirit, and a power of unification has been released in the world. In this sense, we can say the death of Jesus, the free surrender of his life on the Cross to his Father, was a cosmic event.[50]

The resurrection is the historic sign of the cosmic redemption. It is a sign that not only soul, but also body has been liberated from its present bondage and has become a 'new creation'. Christ has achieved this for the whole of mankind. It is extended to all, both in the past, in the present and in the future. This Cosmic Christ is active at every stage of history and in the hearts of human beings, regardless of religious boundaries. In this manner, he is fulfilling, "not only God's revelation to Israel, Moses, David and the prophets, but also the whole of the cosmic covenant, the cosmic revelation."[51]

Furthermore, according to Griffiths, the event of resurrection has released the Spirit of God into the cosmos. It has taken possession of the entire cosmos, and penetrates it at every level. This process has been perfected at the ascension of Christ, because he has become the Cosmic Lord. Griffiths elaborates : "Finally he becomes a spiritual body at the ascension. He transcends matter at both the gross and the subtle levels and enters the spiritual level and, with that transformation, the matter of the universe is taken up into the Godhead".[52]

CONCLUSION

From our analysis it becomes apparent that Griffiths, in comparison with *avataras* of Hinduism, is making an attempt to discern and discover the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. This kind of approach is quite common in the multi-religious context. For intance, Chakkarai, a

50 Ibid., pp.187-188.

51 Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* op.cit., p.30.

52 Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality* op. cit., pp. 167-168.

Hindu convert, who wanted to rethink and assimilate his Christian faith through his own cultural and philosophical background, asserted firmly that Jesus Christ is the unique *avatara.*[53] As pointed out in our analysis, Jesus Christ, unlike the *avataras* of Hinduism, was a historical person who revealed the unfathomable mystery of God and got fully involved in the transformation of mankind. But the emphasis laid on the historicity of any religious figure in an effort to affirm the uniqueness is not so appealing to the Hindu mind. Evidently, great religious personalities such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi have not given much importance to the historical character of Jesus Christ. For them whether Jesus existed or not does not matter, he is a form of God and one of the *avataras.* Griffiths, on the contrary, is convinced that the historicity is an important element to be reckoned with, as it makes Jesus Christ really unique. Undoubtedly, God's entering into human history, Jesus' historical birth, life, salvific death and resurrection are the unique features of Christianity.

The moral perfection of Jesus Christ, as the son of God, is another significant point for Griffiths. Unlike the *avataras* of Hinduism, he, not only entered into human history, but also manifested the love of God by being victimized on the cross. God's love is surpassing itself and emptying itself. It is indeed incomparable and unparalleled. His self-emptying for the sake of humanity is particularly alluring and fascinating millions of other religious people in India. In fact, in accordance with the Indian tradition, renouncing, self-emptying and suffering are the marks of a person's intimacy to God. Having realized the value of this point Subhash Anand writes as follows :

It is true that in Hinduism we have an idea of God's descent *(avatara),* but there is no place for any suffering in this descent. There may be some appearance of suffering, but this is like the suffering of an actor on the stage. It is all part of a play *(lila).* The idea that God

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53 Cfr. P. T. Thomas ed., *Vengal Chakkarai* (Madras : CLS, 1981).

does suffer and can suffer just baffles us. This, I believe, is the God that Jesus reveals. This, I believe, is the uniqueness of Jesus.[54]

At the same time, it is important to note that Griffiths, while speaking of *avataras* of Hinduism and particularly of Krishna, makes it clear that Jesus Christ, the humble servant of God, has not come to wipe them out completely due to the fact that they always remain of permanent significance, giving a specific insight into the Divine Mystery. It is his conviction that each religious tradition has its own specific character which must be acknowledged and appreciated with a spirit of openness and humility. Therefore, as he appeals, the Christian affirmation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is neither to be imposed on people of other religions in any form in the interreligious encounter nor to be relativized for the sake of creating an atmosphere of good will and harmony. What is demanded of Christians, on the contrary, is to bear witness to the mystery of Jesus Christ in their concrete lives, however hard it might be.

Dr.S. Devaraj

54 Subhash Anand, "Universally Unique and Uniquely Universal," *Vidyajyoti*, 55 (1991), p.422